

Insatiability (In Shops Now)

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Regenia Gagnier built much of her work in the first half of her career around the historical convergence between a revolution in economic thought – formalised first by Stanley Jevons in the ‘Calculus of Pleasure and Pain’ provided in *The Theory of Political Economy* in 1871 (Jevons 1871, vii), and sometimes known for short as the marginal utility revolution – and a corresponding revolution in human organisation and behaviour.

Marginal utility theory depends upon the familiar idea of diminishing returns. Put differently, it is the principle that there is no good thing of which it is true that the more you have of it the better. The attempt to evade the entropy of value through the invention of new kinds of thing to value and strive for leads, according to Jevons, to the insatiable nature of tastes and desires:

The necessities of life are so few and simple, that a man is soon satisfied in regard to these, and desires to extend his range of enjoyment. His first object is to vary his food; but there soon arises the desire of variety and elegance in dress; and to this succeeds the desire to build, to ornament, and to furnish – tastes which are absolutely insatiable where they exist, and seem to increase with every improvement in civilisation. (Jevons 1871, 48)

Insatiability does seem to be a problem of abundance. Indeed, perhaps it is *the* problem of abundance, a problem that is the more intense because we are so attuned to thinking that the only real problem is the lack of abundance.

Though we have just heard Jevons refer to the ‘tastes which are absolutely insatiable’, he does not himself use the phrase ‘the insatiability of human wants’, the title of Regenia Gagnier’s book of 2000. Though the phrase has the ring of a quotation, I fancy it is Regenia’s own admirable fangling. In any case, I welcome the chance to reflect on the word *insatiability*, not least because I am myself on the point of exposing a defenceless world to a book called *Exorbitance: A Grammar of Overdoing*.

What does insatiability mean, or, more precisely, what does it do? It can be read positively, as the incitement of the desirability of the endlessness of desire, for an example in the ‘libidinal economy’ excitingly canvassed by Jean-François Lyotard when I was a stripling. It can also be read negatively, in the reprovability of greed, lust and the longing for luxury. (The history of the word ‘lust’, which, in English, moves from simple wanting or inclination to immoderate or incontinent craving, might in itself serve to disappoint the idea that insatiability has its dawn in the 1890s.) Actually there is another mode of the negative reading of insatiability, which has also had a long, and continuing career in human history, namely the attempt at voiding desire in response to the conviction of its unrealisability. One might think of the kind of pathology regretted, if undoubtedly with a certain compensatory relish, by Schopenhauer, when he writes

No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which relieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. (Schopenhauer 1969,1.196)

Schopenhauer’s sourness clings in Philip Larkin’s poem ‘Money’:

I listen to money singing. It is like looking down
Through long French windows at a provincial town,
The slums, the canal, the churches, ornate and mad
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad. (Larkin 1988, 198)

The prospect of insatiability can therefore be both philosophically inflammatory and tranquilising, pleasure-principle and death-drive.

In the period in which the theory of marginal utility came to seem persuasive and pervasive, the organisation of social and economic life seemed to provide ever-more abundant evidence of its applicability. This might be regarded as precisely what one might expect, that the theory arises as an attempt to describe and explain a practice. But this then raises the question: is marginal utility theory an explanation of consumer capitalism (the latter word never used by Jevons in *The Theory of Political Economy*) or is it its epiphenomenon? Is marginal utility diagnosis or symptom of the consumer society?

This raises a further question. Jevons himself observes that ‘the law, as I state it, is no novelty’ (Jevons 1871, 65). He cites a number of predecessors in the nineteenth century, but might also have quoted Aristotle, who observes

offhandedly in his *Politics*, as though repeating a truism, that ‘external goods have a limit, as has any instrument (and everything useful is useful for something), so an excessive amount of them must necessarily do harm, or do no good, to its possessor’ (Aristotle 1944, 535). If the principle of marginal utility has been apparent, to some at least, for some considerable time, can its operation sensibly be restricted to the arrival of consumer society, and the feverish relativity of value that it brings with it, a relativity of value that has succeeded remarkably in appalling both National Socialists and the other kind?

Writing *Exorbitance* has confirmed me in the view that the perplexities of excess have been with us for many centuries and are perhaps sempiternal, if also, for that very reason, historically polymorphous (polymorphousness being the executive form of insatiability). In economic affairs, which have been played out in many more registers than we seem disposed to recognise, despite Gagnier’s own efforts, it seems always to have been true that nothing exceeds like excess. Cultures that do not specialise in ways of overdoing things disappear into the background. This may have to do with the principle of intrinsic excess constituted by language, for which I have proposed the revival of the rhetorical term *auxesis* (Connor 2026, 160). This allows us, and requires us, to make estimates of the goods we conceive and consume, and makes it impossible to separate the goodness of goods from acts of estimation, fore and aft. The imagination of insatiability, of what is in excess of what can be realised, may be primordial, precisely because imagination itself, once augmented by language, is inaugurally in excess of the real.

One might point, in defence of the idea of the contemporary production of insatiability, to the rise of advertising. But I use the word ‘production’ to hint that I do not think we have really moved from a society of production to a society of consumption. By contrast, we may have seen an expansion of the realm of production to include the production of wants alongside the goods we are supposed to hanker after, like the fabled railway engine that lays down its own track in front of it (Farrell 1973, 93). The consumption of expectation in the expectation of consumption was neatly encapsulated by the 1970s popular TV journalist Alan Whicker in remarking that ‘The national dish of America is the menu’.

Advertising seems to drive the world economy, in the sense that the so-called ‘attention economy’ is futile unless somebody makes it worth your while to capture and hold people’s attention, meaning that most so-called technology companies are essentially in the business of advertising. Among the most

important things ever uttered on this matter are the four words which dropped from Mark Zuckerberg's lips in reply to Senator Orrin Hatch, who, during a congressional hearing in 2018, had wondered, reasonably enough, how on earth Facebook could ever make any money: 'We sell ads, Senator'.

Who among us is now not, for some very large portion of our time, in the advertising business? Universities have been if not from the very beginning, then certainly since their foundations began to be exercises in philanthropic self-glorification, in the business of impact. And when was there a time before advertising? When have *Homo sapiens*, or, for that matter, songbirds or sweet peas, been able to make any kind of living without stylistic display? When, to take one notable example, did the market in hair arise, or, more specifically, the market in hairstyles? I allude to the traffic-stopping question asked by the anthropologist Alison Jolly: why does the hair on human heads keep growing, unlike all other kinds of hair of which we know, on all other kinds of creature? Answer: so there can be hairstyles (Jolly 2005, 5). Such marginal utility did the culture of coiffure have that it passed across from culture into nature, from something we do to something we genetically are. Roundhead humans who could not get hairdos, for want of sufficient superflux of hair to do, died without issue.

As we have seen, Jevons observes that the outsmarting of diminishing returns comes not from intensification, but from variation: in the beginning was the curl. And one of the most polytropically perverse forms of variation in the calculus of pleasure and pain is transvaluation, in which pleasure overcomes pain by incorporating and entering into it. It should not be a surprise that a characteristic form of pathology prompted by ready abundance is the libido of abstinence. Hence the attention I give in *Exorbitance* to the exorbitance of self-denial (Connor 2026, 127-52), for example in the epidemic of eating disorders. But the thymotic psychomachias of disadvantage and failure-prestige that Mara Selvini Palazzoli has called 'sacrificial escalation' (Palazzoli 1988, 195-7) draw deeply and unignorably on the ascetologies and erotics of self-denial in which history is so abundant. When it comes to writing off loss, or writing it up, as profit, there is a massive historical endowment on which to draw. So, though we may feel the itch to new idioms of insatiability, we ought still to say, as Larkin narrowly avoided saying, 'Man hands on insatiability to man: It deepens like a coastal shelf'.

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